

## LOUDSPEAKER

Floorstanding four-way loudspeaker  
 Made by: Franco Serblin Studio, Vicenza, Italy  
 Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd, UK  
 Telephone: 0045 9684 5100  
 Web: www.franco-serblin.it; www.absolutesounds.com  
 Price: £24,998

AUDIO  
FILE

# Franco Serblin Ktêma

As boutique Italian brand Franco Serblin prepares to boost its range we look at the iconic flagship  
 Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

**F**ranco Serblin, who passed away in 2013, first unveiled his flagship Ktêma in 2010. He had left Sonus faber, which he founded in 1983, in 2006, so the Ktêma was in development for nearly five years before he felt it was ready to be sold by the new company bearing his name. I remember the tension during its gestation, and Franco's elation at being able to produce a no-compromise system – not that he was ever restrained at Sonus faber. Think of the phenomenal Extrema, Guarneri and Stradivarius. The wait for the Ktêma proved worth it – as did the anticipation lasting a decade to hear a pair in my own system.

Why the delay in the full *HFN* treatment of this system? Whatever hindered the distribution here, we in the UK now have full access to this company, having looked at the *Accordo* two years ago [*HFN* Jan '18]. Renewed efforts and a discernible buzz about the brand thus justify our examination of this £25k-per-pair flagship system – its longevity marking it as a classic-in-the-making.

## WHIFF OF LUXURY

We reviewed the Ktêma in Satin Sycamore, which would look simply wonderful in some open-architecture cabin with lots of woodwork, while those after a more tech-y feel can opt for high-gloss piano black. Both are capped and shod with hand-polished aluminium top and bottom plates, the latter accepting four superbly-finished, adjustable spikes. They're threaded, with caps on the top, so the attention to detail pays off in the absence of typically ugly, black anodised spikes which look like someone bought them in bulk at B&Q. By contrast, the Ktêma rests on bejewelled feet.

Installing them is a two-person effort as they weigh 55kg apiece and you do not want to mar the sublime finishes. They actually arrive protected by velvet drawstring covers, reminiscent of limited-edition champagne, costly perfumes and fine watches. This is what high-end audio should convey: the same whiff of luxury we associate with other artisan creations, and the Ktêma lets you see, feel and hear where your money went.

## TRIPLE ARCH

Once out of the boxes, don't rush to install the spikes. I recommend positioning the speakers before fitting them, even though they also come with small metal coasters to protect wooden or tiled floors. The coasters are rubber underneath, so do not slide, but positioning prior to spiking and marking the locations with tape is advisable regardless of floor surface.

Unlike the Sonus fabers of Franco's day, the Ktêma's toe-in isn't intended to form a triangle that crosses just in front of the hot seat, but work best aimed precisely at the listening position, so that turning one's head to look at each speaker results in a face-on view of the baffle and drivers.

Franco's obsession was all about recreating the space of a live event. This, in turn, explains the unusual shape of the Ktêma and its almost-triangular footprint culminating in a severely narrow baffle only 170mm wide. That's narrower than an LS3/5A. The speaker spreads to

**RIGHT:** Behind a tensioned 'elastic band' grille lies a 28mm Ragnar Lian soft-dome tweeter and two 100mm midrange drivers. Bass is handled by two 230mm alloy-coned woofers that vent from the lower rear/side of the cabinet





## FRANCO SERBLIN

As recounted in our Accordo review [HFN Jan '18], I considered Franco Serblin a mentor – thanks especially to his thoughts on soundstage recreation – but even I couldn't anticipate a belated revival in recognition of his contribution to speaker design. As has been said many times (and not just by me), Franco did more to influence the appearance of dynamic speakers through his first brand, Sonus faber, than any designer since the early 1980s. We owe domestically-acceptable speaker aesthetics largely, if not solely to him, seen first in the Sonus faber Snail and concurrently with cabinets he made for Cizek Audio Systems.

Staying true to his design philosophy with his eponymous brand, Franco made the Ktêma and other models with more extreme overall forms than he produced for Sonus faber. His signature criteria continue in the use of real wood in solid staves, furniture-grade finishes, rounded surfaces to create sculptural, pleasing-to-the-eye forms, unusual grilles culminating in the 'strings' which grace both Sonus faber and Serblin speakers, tapered-back enclosures, leather-clad baffles and integral stands in unusual materials. This is both visionary, and inspirational.

400mm across the rear, while front-to-back it's 460mm deep. And they like to breathe, so allow at least 0.5m from all walls.

Franco dubbed the construction a 'triple arch cabinet structure'. It is made from thin layers of wood and aliphatic glue 'hot pressed' together, all chosen to control enclosure resonances. That narrow front baffle, Franco told me, 'was reduced to the physical limit of the driver dimensions'. He felt that it was necessary 'in order to offer the smallest surface possible for the untrammelled dispersion of midrange and high frequencies'.

Another benefit is the 'improved transmission of the radiated energy'. This is all part of his quest to recreate a proscenium effect, and I have to admit I have never heard a non-panel speaker that 'disappears' like the Ktêma. There are simply no clues to the presence of a cabinet-type enclosure.

A vertical array comprising a 28mm soft-dome tweeter above two custom-made, 100mm midrange units resides in a step-compensated baffle, in what the company calls 'a cardioid acoustic-resistance configuration'. For some reason, I fantasised about the company issuing that driver array in a 45cm-tall standmount enclosure to fill the gap between the Accordo mini-monitor and the

111cm-tall Ktêma – not too far a stretch as the mids, fitted in their own 'double aperiodic' sub-structure, could easily extend below the 135Hz where they meet the woofers [see PM's Lab Report, p39].

A brace of these custom-made, compression-loaded 230mm metal cone drivers fires out of the back of each tower. The woofers are covered by a slotted rear panel with vents at the sides, which force the sound outward. Those with recall for hi-fi trivia will remember that the original Extrema [HFN Jul '14] was fitted with a metal plate standing proud of its rear-firing KEF B139 woofer to similar effect.

Franco described this configuration as the 'waveguide that characterises the Ktêma system'. It was his desire for the low frequencies to help support the goal to 'physically recall what we see in a real proscenium, where the soloists are at the front of the stage, while the rest of the orchestra is at the back'. While very low frequencies are largely omni-directional here, most of the energy is guided along the convex sides of the speaker, with only a small fraction transmitted directly through the rear, via the slits in the back panel.

## A SOUND FOR LIFE

As the speakers' cabling throughout is Yter's pure silver-palladium mono wiring, I used the same for the review. Connection was straightforward via superbly-made binding posts. And there was an instant discovery, which concurred with PM's findings [p39]: the imagined ease-of-driving suggested by the 40hm impedance and ➤

**'This speaker truly walks the walk and talks the talk'**